



Riach, A. (2017) Mysterious voices and lasting truths: Alan Riach takes a literary tour of the Borders. *National*, 2017, 10 March.

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Deposited on: 01 May 2018

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Mysterious voices and lasting truths

Alan Riach

New writing always draws on old things. Nowhere are we entirely free of the past. Blindingly obvious? Maybe. Still, it's a truth that can help us face up to the unpredicted circumstances the present and the future bring, the difficult choices and unanswered questions, challenged commitments, how we deal with the wild places of our individual lives, in body and mind, or social questions, political decisions that confront us.

Some places have particular aura in this regard. Every time I've visited the Isle of Skye, from my first sojourn there in 1979 at the characteristically urgent insistence of Sorley MacLean, that island has delivered a strange sense of being both hard and restorative. It's an odd pairing: neither only the gentle sense of a recuperative ethos, nor the sheer challenge of its aspects of austerity, but a quality where both are present. You're in touch with something tidal, recovering, self-renewing, which helps or can help us mere mortals, but something also geologically certain, identified, there, regardless of the human story. The Borders has a different kind of presence.

I always feel refreshed and cautioned by the Borders, every time I visit, or stray into its domain. It casts a charm and at the same time it reminds you of dangerous things. The Debatable Lands have been bloodily contested, and if in older times the bloodshed was literal and visible, there are questions just as vital about the way we live now. Mr Mundell and Mrs May are engaged in border warfare of a different kind than that of the 16th century, but one no less dangerous. What is at stake, and what the cost of the conflict might be, are perennial questions in struggles like this: what are we fighting for?

Knowing the answers in greater depth might help our own resolution.

The value of the struggle is usually described in material terms, in terms of the economy, or even just of comfort and prosperity, as if these were all that mattered. Yet if you allow it to work upon you, the Scottish Borders is one of the greatest places on earth for a sense of non-material value. This is nowhere more palpable than in the Border Ballads.

The world of the ballads is social, palpable, and even when haunted, earthly. From that "earthed" sense of reality, something of an "immaterial" reality can be felt. And when

you go for a walk or a drive in the Borders, you can sometimes feel that otherworldly atmosphere. The living and the dead, what the dead have still to teach the living, what we can learn if we read and listen closely to them, these are neverending matters of real consequence. Let's take a stroll and think about this.

We might begin right on the border at Ruthwell Church, to see the 18-foot high 8th-century Ruthwell Cross, on which are carved runic characters and fragments of words from the anonymous ancient poem, "The Dream of the Rood". Then travelling north-east, climb Whita Hill, above the little town of Langholm, where the Hugh MacDiarmid Monument by Jake Harvey recollects the poet in its form of an open book, through which you can see the Borders landscape. From the hills around, three rivers run to a confluence in Langholm itself, the poet's birthplace: the Wauchope, the Esk and the Ewes. The composer F.G. Scott, a Hawick man, taught him at Langholm school. The post office building housed the Telford library he read his way through as a boy. As a young man, he believed he could tell precisely where he was in Langholm simply from the sound of the running water of the rivers, each with its different timbre and tone. Langholm features lovingly in many of MacDiarmid's poems, short stories, sketches and the essay, "My Native Place" and in his autobiography, *Lucky Poet* (1943), where he recounts some outrageous goings-on at his school.

Going further north-east to Ednam, we'll find be in the territory of James Thomson (1700-48), author of perhaps the most influential book of poems in the early 18th century, *The Seasons* (1726-30), born in the Old Manse and commemorated by the James Thomson obelisk, outside Kelso on the Ednam road.

We might slope over to Selkirk, where Walter Scott was the Sheriff, working regularly at the Selkirk Courthouse from 1800 to 1832. The statue of Scott in the market-square and another statue, at the far end of the High Street, of the explorer of Africa, Mungo Park, reminds us that these men were friends and contemporaries. *Niger: The Life of Mungo Park* (1934) by Lewis Grassie Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell) includes vivid scenes of Park's meetings with Scott, and Park's own account of his travels is compelling in its own right.

When we come to Melrose, we'll remember Canto 2 of Scott's poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*: "If thou wouldst view fair Melrose aright, / Go visit it by the pale moonlight..." Nearby are the Eildon Hills, where the Eildon Tree Stone marks the spot where Thomas the Rhymer was carried off by the Queen of Elfland, to spend years as if they were hours in the

land of the ever-young. The wizard Michael Scott created the three Eildon hills by splitting them out of one hill with a fantastical spell described by James Hogg in his phantasmagorical novel *The Three Perils of Man* (1822). Rich in ballad, folklore and literary references, the Eildon Hills are also known as the location under which King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table are currently resting. According to Alistair Moffat, in his speculative historical study *Arthur and the Lost Kingdoms* (2012), the original site of Camelot may have been Roxburgh. Basing his conclusion on place-names and local lore, rather than on historical data and verifiable archaeology, Moffat is neither credulous nor strictly scientific. He reminds us that there are possibilities beyond known facts. On the hill above Melrose at Bemersyde is the imposing red sandstone statue of Sir William Wallace by John Smith of Darnick, commissioned by the Earl of Buchan and unveiled in 1814. Just outside of Melrose is Abbotsford, Scott's home, with its armouries of relics and library of around 9,000 books.

But there's more to the Borders than Scott. In nearby Galashiels, there's a statue of a Border Reiver, a man on horseback, with helmet and lance. This memorial to Borderers who lost their lives in the world wars of the 20th century links them back to their ancestors, who rode across the Debatable Lands, raiding for sheep, cattle and other plunder. They have been described by the novelist George MacDonald Fraser historically in *The Steel Bonnets* (1971) and in fiction in his short, darkly evocative novel, *The Candlemass Road* (1993) and there is another fine novel evocative of their time and ethos, *The Hanging Tree* (1990) by Allan Massie.

All poems have some relation to song, even simply in the music of the voice, and the Ballads have developed this tradition across centuries. One of the most famous tells the story of the border family of Armstrong, as powerful in their day and domains as the king and his courtiers in theirs. When the king and his men surround the outlaw leader, Johnny Armstrong, he sees that he is outnumbered and asks for mercy, but the king sentences him to be hanged. He realises his position and ruefully but defiantly says:

“To seek het watter beneath cauld ice
Surely is a great folie
I have asked for grace at a graceless face
But there is nane for my men and me.”

We might think of that in a contemporary context too. Think of it as a four-line summary of Ken Loach's fine film, *I, Daniel Blake*. And there's a hard and simple lesson: don't expect something these people cannot give: it might be in their power, but it's not in their character to give it. The truths the Ballads embody are as lasting in human terms, and as vividly realised, as those of Shakespeare, Burns, Scott, George Eliot or Hugh MacDiarmid.

We haven't even mentioned the John Buchan Centre in Peebles, where Buchan's story, on the cusp of Empire and Modernity is contained in a few compact, richly-stored rooms and displays, packed with implication. And we've hardly touched on the richness of the works of James Hogg. Or the Ballads themselves. There are many figures whose deep roots in the Borders repay further study. We'll come back to them.

Let me end with one of the most neglected. The poet, philosopher, literary historian and critic John Veitch (1829-94) was born in Peebles and became the Professor of Logic and Rhetoric at Glasgow University from 1864 to 1894. The author of *Tweed and Other Poems* (1875) and *Merlin* (1889), his *The Feeling for Nature in Scottish Poetry* (1887) is worth reading, just to drop back into that late 19th-century world where conversations about such subjects were intrinsically of a different character. We live and learn.

Veitch is commemorated by a marble and gold mosaic tablet at the foot of the Randolph Staircase in the main building of Glasgow University. It used to be one of a series of portraits of esteemed professors that lined that stairwell, but a few years ago these were taken down and redistributed in different rooms. Veitch stayed where he was, though, because his portrait was built into the wall itself. Not to be moved. The inscription on the base of the panel reads: "Through mystery to mystery, from God and to God." You don't have to be a Christian to understand what that means. Mysteries are real.

In a world in which hopeless materiality, bad economics, inimical science and the graceless faces of Westminster power seem to rule, here's an emblem to tell us that there is always more to it than that. Literature, and the Borders, have exactly this greater provenance. Their voices will always keep reminding us of this.

[Boxed off:]

Alan Riach describes an eldritch encounter that happened to him years ago, in a place named Drumelzier, where the Powsail burn runs to the Tweed. The words can't be pronounced

straight from the page. You need local voices to tell you how. This is where Merlin is said to be buried. Maybe it still breathes something of the Border spirit.

Drumelzier

(At Merlin's Grave)

I have to try to make some sense
of this strange place. It is as if translation
had been made, in language I can't emulate
or describe; but remember it
like this:

I pulled the van over, on the gravel
by the sideroad, switched off the engine;
Jim and I got out. The sudden interruption
of movement, machine, the sharp metallic
edge of the van-doors shutting, key grating the lock,
released us into sunlight, afternoon, a loose but close assembly
of trees, leaves silver, green and whispering. The breeze was
shifting through them in directions, unpredicted. It was warm.
We walked across the road, down a yellow grass bank
to the flat triangle of field, beside the Powsail burn,
running there beside us towards the Tweed, which
we couldn't see, lower in a cut in the valley

ahead of us, where we could see the shadow
and the dark walls of trees beyond, on
the other side of the river.

Shadows seemed to move among the leaves
and slowly, the perceptible audible context
was changed. We could hear
no more the rustling sound of leaves; we could hear
instead, an actual conversation, taking place.

You know how it is when your mind's half-focused,
your ears and eyes in a crowd and
what you hear and what you see are indistinct,
but certain, present, there? This was
like that. An actual conversation, voices, more
than two, a crowd, as if,
a party, talking, murmuring too low
to hear exactly what or what
their speech was of. Unobtrusive, unbelievable,
we looked around, and then at each other:

“Can you hear – ”

“Aye...”

A silent smile; another. No
explanation possible, then or now. No-one else nearby
at all, for miles. We waited in the middle of the voices

as they spoke (not to us exactly; for us?

Certainly, we overheard or heard what was

within their world, as it was ours), then turned and

walked away from there.

More than twenty years

from then to this. Maybe I decided

long ago, there are some things

no answers help.

I've heard of fearful

ghosts, but this was something warming, good,

a kind of shared acknowledgement, unexplained, a strange

translation, a mass of living language from beyond

whatever it was we could see, so clearly.